

Appleby Archaeology Group October Meeting

Dr Nigel Melton from Bradford University introduced the Appleby Archaeology Group to the working of a country pottery in the 17th and 18th centuries. He based his talk on his experience at an excavation in Polesworth, a village in Warwickshire a few miles south east of Tamworth. The village lies on the edge of the Warwickshire coal fields where the geological conditions provide suitable clay and fuel for pottery production.

There is evidence of two major periods of pottery production in the surrounding area. Firstly by the Romans from the 1st to 4th century and mortaria (large shallow dishes) from the area have been found as far north as Hadrian's wall. The second period of major production lasted from the 12th to 14th century and was based around Nuneaton where 100 medieval kilns have been found. Terracotta roof tiles, bricks and drainage pipes continued to be made but production was on a small scale and by 1700, records indicate that there was only 1 potter working.

In Polesworth one of the roads is named Potters Lane and local tradition supported the idea that there had been a pottery but there was little evidence until the 1950s when a jug was found with Polesworth 1801 written on as decoration. It was not until the late 1970s that investigations began with members of the local history and archaeology groups field walking the gardens in Potters Lane. The significant breakthrough came in 1986 when one of the members spotted pieces of pottery (shards) in the rubble of a building site in the village a little way from Potters Lane. The builders, who conveniently were about to go on holiday, gave permission for further investigations of what turned out to be waste from a pottery. A trench was put in parallel to the waste dump and this revealed that a pit had been dug initially for the purpose of obtaining clay. Later the same pit had been used to discard ash and waste products, such as broken misfired pots and pieces of clay used to protect the pots during firing. There were distinct layers of debris suggesting two phases when this backfilling had occurred.

From the study of the pieces of pottery it was found that a range of vessels had been made and that most had been hand thrown. There was coarse ware, lead glazed on the inside and on the upper part of the external surface and finer pottery of patterned slip ware. The majority of the pottery was dairy ware and included milk pans, butter pots and cylindrical jars. These vessels had different rims suggesting different periods of production. A distinctive pie crust edge was seen on the plates. Unglazed agricultural wares were also found such as plant pots some with patterned

edges and side drainage holes. One very large pot was reconstructed and found to have the date 6th of May 17..... but to the frustration of the archaeologists the shard with the year on it was not found.

The pottery would have changed little over the years so it was difficult to date. Pieces of clay pipe were found in the debris, many bearing the maker's initials enabling the experts to date them and thus the pottery lying in the same layer. Pottery production lasted throughout the 18th century but one document records the transportation of Polesworth pots in 1688 and the jug found with the date 1801 indicates a longer period of working.

Records tell us that it was a family business employing, probably, six people with one or two of them being potters. No remains of the kiln have been found but it is likely to have been a coal fired brick kiln. The pottery that was made would have supplied the local community within a radius of perhaps 10-12 miles. Horticultural pots from Polesworth have been found to the south at Castle Bromwich but no Polesworth pottery has been found to the north which may have been supplied by the potteries of Staffordshire and Derbyshire.

Dr Melton concluded by describing a large pottery find (an assemblage) in a ditch clearing in a village 12 miles from Polesworth. This find suggested that the local coaching inn had had a clearout to make way for the, then modern, factory produced wares that were becoming available around 1780. A wide range of decorated pottery, some of which would have been used for drinking tea, was found, suggesting that as the fashion changed the crockery was replaced. Other items found included chamber pots, horticultural pots, medicine and wine bottles, beer mugs, but no drinking glasses! This is the only assemblage that has been found in a rural setting and it provides an insight into what was happening at a rural coaching inn in the 1700s.

Dr Melton answered a number of questions from the floor before being thanked and warmly applauded for his interesting and informative talk.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 9th November at 7.30pm in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby when Professor Brian Roberts of Durham University will talk on *The Development of Villages in the Eden Valley*.

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